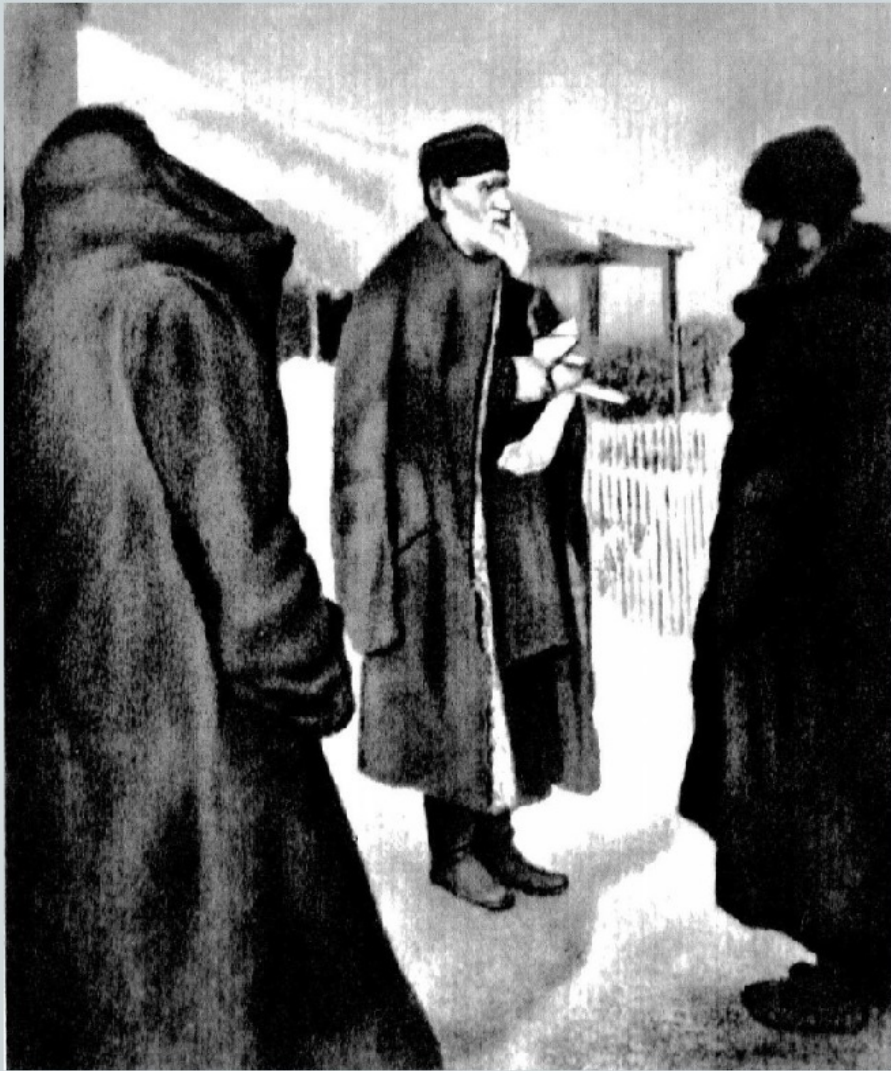


Master and Man



Lev Tolstoy

Master and Man by Lev Tolstoy

I

It was in the seventies, the day after the feast of Saint Nicholas in the winter. There had been a festival in the parish, and the church sexton, Vassili Andreitch Brekhunoff, (who was also a merchant of the second guild), had been forced to remain at home, since not only was his presence necessary at the church, but he had been receiving and entertaining some of his friends and relations. Now, however, the last of his guests had departed, and he was able to get himself ready to visit a neighbouring landowner, for the purpose of buying some timber for which he had long been in treaty. He was in a hurry to be off, lest rival buyers from the town should deprive him of this eligible bargain. The only reason why the young landowner had asked ten thousand roubles for the timber was that Vassili Andreitch had offered him seven - and seven represented about a third of its value. Perhaps Vassili might have gone on haggling still further (for the wood was in his own district, and there was a recognized agreement between the local merchants and himself that one merchant should not bid against another in the same district), were it not that he had heard that the Government forest contractors were also thinking of coming to treat for the Goviatchkinsky timber, and therefore he had better make up his mind to go at once and clinch the matter. So, as soon as ever the festival was over, he took seven hundred roubles of his own out of the strong-box, added to them two thousand three hundred more out of the church funds which he had by him (making three thousand in all) , and counted them carefully. Then he placed them in his pocket-book and got ready to go.

Nikita - the only one of Vassili's workmen who was not drunk that day - ran to put the horse in. Nikita was not drunk that day for the reason that he had formerly been a toper, but, after pawning his jacket and leather boots for drink during the flesh-eating days, had suddenly foresworn liquor altogether, and drunk nothing during the second month. Even on the present occasion he had kept his vow, in spite of the temptation of the liquor which had flowed in all directions during the first two days of the festival.

Nikita was a man of about fifty, and hailed from a neighbouring village -

where, however, it was said that he was not a householder, but had lived most of his life among strangers. Everywhere he was valued for his handiness, industry and strength, as well as, still more, for his kindly, cheerful disposition. Yet he had never remained long in any one place, since twice a year, or more, he had been accustomed to get drunk, and at those times would not only pawn everything he possessed, but grow uproarious and quarrelsome as well. Vassili himself had dismissed him more than once, yet had always taken him on again because of the store which he set by his honesty, care for animals, and (most important of all) cheapness. In fact, Vassili allowed Nikita a wage, not of eighty roubles a year - the true market value of such a workman - but of forty only. Moreover, this wage was doled out irregularly and in dribblets, as well as, for the most part, not in cash at all, but in the form of goods purchased at a high price from Vassili's own store.

Nikita's wife, Martha - a rugged dame who had once been good-looking - lived at home with their little lad and two girls, but never invited her husband to come and see her; since, in the first place, she had lived for the last twenty years with a cooper (originally a man from a distant village who had come to lodge in the hut), and, in the second, because, although she could do what she liked with her husband when he was sober, she dreaded him like fire when he was drunk. Once, for instance, when drunk at home he had seized the occasion to avenge himself upon his wife for all his submissiveness to her when sober by breaking into her private box, possessing himself of her best clothes, laying all the gowns and other gewgaws upon the wood-block, and chopping them into shreds with an axe. Yet all his earnings were handed over to Martha. Never once had he disputed this arrangement. In fact, only a couple of days before the festival she had driven over to Vassili's store, and been supplied by him with white meal, tea, sugar, and a pint of vodka, to the value of three roubles, as well as with five roubles in cash - for all of which she had thanked Vassili as for a particular favour, although, as a matter of fact, Vassili was in Nikita's debt to the extent of at least twenty roubles.

- What agreement need you and I make together? - Vassili had said to Nikita.
- Take what you need as you earn it. I don't do business as other folks do - keep my creditors waiting, and go in for detailed accounts and deductions and so on. You and I can trust one another. Only serve me well, and I shall never

fail you.

In saying this, Vassili really had believed that he was being good to Nikita, for he could speak so persuasively and had always been so entirely supported in his decisions by his dependents, from Nikita upwards, that even he himself had come to feel comfortably persuaded that he was not cheating them, but actually benefiting them.

- Yes, yes, I understand you, Vassili Andreitch, - Nikita had replied. - I understand you perfectly well, and will serve and work for you as for my own father.

Nevertheless Nikita had not been ignorant that Vassili was cheating him. He had only felt that it would be no use his trying to get a detailed account out of his master, and that, in default of another place to go to, he had better grin and bear it and take what he could get.

So, when ordered to harness the horse, Nikita proceeded to the stable in his usual cheerful, good-natured manner, and with the usual easy stride of his rather waddling legs. There he took down from a peg the heavy headstall, with its straps and tassels, and, rattling the bit against the side-pieces, proceeded to the stall where the horse was standing which he was to get ready.

- Oh ho, so you find time long, do you, my little beauty? - he said in reply to the low whinny of welcome which greeted him from the shapely, middle-sized, low-rumped, dark-brown stallion cob which was the sole occupant of the loose-box. - Nay, nay, - he went on. - You are in a hurry to be off, I daresay, but I must water you first, - (he always spoke to the animal as one might speak to a being capable of understanding human speech). Then, having wiped the sleek, though dusty and harness-galled, back of the cob with a cloth, he adjusted the headstall to the handsome young head, pulled the ears and forehead-tuft through, let down the halter, and led the animal out to drink. As soon as Brownie had picked his way gingerly out of the dung-heaped stall he grew lively and threw up his heels, pretending that he wanted to kick Nikita as the latter trotted beside him to the water-trough.

- Quiet then, quiet then, you little rascal! - exclaimed Nikita, though well aware that Brownie was taking good care to throw out his hind leg in such a manner as only to graze Nikita's greasy fur coat, not strike it direct - a trick which Nikita always admired.

Having drunk his fill of cold water, the animal snorted as he stood twitching his strong, wet lips, from the hairs of which the bright, transparent drops kept dripping back into the trough. Then he stood motionless for an instant or two, as though engaged in thought, and then suddenly gave a loud neigh.

- You don't want any more. You wouldn't get it even if you did, so you needn't ask for it, - said Nikita, explaining his conduct to Brownie with absolute gravity and precision. Then he set off running back to the stable, holding the spirited young cob by the halter as the animal kicked and snorted all across the yard. None of the other workmen were about - only the cook's husband, who had come over for the festival from another village.

- Go in, will you, my boy, - said Nikita to this man, - and ask which sledge I am to get ready - the big one or the little one?

The man disappeared into the house (which was iron-roofed and stood upon a raised foundation), and returned in a moment with a message that it was the little sledge which was to be used. Meanwhile Nikita had slipped the collar over the cob's head and adjusted the brass-studded saddle-piece, and was now walking, with the light-painted douga[1] in one hand and the end of the cob's halter in the other, towards the two sledges standing beneath the shed.

- If the little sledge, then the little sledge, - he remarked, and proceeded to back the clever little animal into the shafts (it pretending meanwhile to bite him) and, with the other man's assistance, to harness it to the vehicle.

When all was ready and there remained only the reins to be put on, Nikita sent his assistant to the stable for some straw, and then to the storehouse for a sack.

- There now, that will do, - said Nikita as he stuffed into the sledge the freshly-cut oaten straw which the man had brought. - But nay, nay (to

Brownie). You need not prick your ears like that! - Well, suppose we put the straw so, and the sack on the top of it. Then it will be comfortable to sit upon, - and he suited the action to the words by tucking the edges of the sack under the straw disposed around the seat.

- Thank you, my dear, - he added to the cook's husband. - Two pairs of hands work quicker than one. After that he buckled the loose ends of the reins together, mounted the splashboard, and drove the good little steed, all impatient to be off, across the frozen dung of the yard to the entrance-gates.

- Uncle Mikit, Uncle Mikit! - came the shrill little voice of a seven-year-old boy from behind him, as the youngster ran hastily out of the porch into the yard - a youngster who was dressed in a short jacket of black fur, new white bast shoes, and a cozy cap. - Let me get up too, - he implored, fastening his jacket as he ran.

- Well, well! Come here then, my dear, - said Nikita, pulling up. Then, seating his master's pale, thin little son behind him, he drove the boy, beaming with pleasure, out into the street.

It was now three o'clock in the afternoon and freezing hard, the thermometer registering only ten degrees; yet the weather was dull and gusty, and fully half the sky was covered by a low, dark bank of cloud. In the courtyard the air was still, but directly one stepped into the street outside the wind became more noticeable and the snow could be seen twirling itself about in wreaths as it was swept from the roof of a neighbouring outbuilding into the corner near the bath-house. Hardly had Nikita returned through the gates and turned the cob's head towards the steps when Vassili Andreitch - a cigarette between his lips, and a sheepskin coat upon his shoulders, fastened tightly and low down with a belt - came out of the house-door upon the high, snow-trampled flight of steps, making them creak loudly under his felt boots as he did so. Drawing the last whiff from his cigarette, he threw down the fag end and stamped it out. Then, puffing the smoke out of his moustache, he glanced at the cob as it re-entered the gates, and began to turn out the corners of his coat-collar in such a way that the fur should be next his face on either side (his face was clean-shaven, except for a moustache), and yet not liable to be

fouled with his breath.

- So you have managed it, you little monkey? - He exclaimed as he caught sight of his little boy seated in the sledge. Vassili was a little animated with the wine which he had been drinking with his guests, and therefore the more ready to approve of all that belonged to him and all that he had done in life. The aspect of his little son at that moment - of the little boy whom he intended to be his heir - afforded him the greatest satisfaction as he stood blinking at him and grinning with his long teeth. In the porch behind Vassili stood his pale, thin wife of Vassili Andreitch. She was enceinte, and had her head and shoulders muffled up in a woollen shawl, so that only her eyes were visible.

- Had not you better take Nikita with you? - She said, stepping timidly forward from the porch. Vassili returned her no answer, but merely frowned angrily as though somehow displeased at her words, and spat upon the ground.

- You see, you will be travelling with money on you, - she continued in the same anxious tone. - Besides, the weather might grow worse.

- Don't I know the road, then, that I must needs have a guide with me? - burst out Vassili with that unnatural stiffening of his lips which marked his intercourse with buyers and sellers when he was particularly desirous of enunciating each syllable distinctly.

- Yes, do take him, for heaven's sake, I implore you, - repeated his wife as she shifted her shawl to protect the other side of her face.

- Goodness! Why, you stick to me like a bathing towel! - cried Vassili. - Where can I find room for him on the sledge?

- I am ready to go, - put in Nikita, cheerfully. - Only, someone else must feed the other horses while I am away, - he turned to his mistress.

- Yes, yes, I will see to that, Nikita, - she replied. - I will tell Simon to do it.

- Then I am to go with you, Vassili Andreitch? - said Nikita, expectantly.

- Well, I suppose I must humour the good lady, - answered Vassili. - Only, if you go, you had better put on a rather better, not to say warmer, diplomatist's uniform than that, - and he smiled and winked one eye at Nikita's fur jacket, which, truth to tell, had holes under its two arms, down the back, and round the sides, besides being greasy, matted, shorn of hooks, and torn into strips round the edges.

- Here, my good fellow! Come and hold the cob, will you? - shouted Nikita across the yard to the cook's husband.

- No, no, let me do it, - cried the little boy, drawing his small, red, frozen hands out of his pockets and catching hold of the chilly reins.

- Don't be too long over your new uniform, please, - said Vassili to Nikita with a grin.

- No, no, Vassili Andreitch - I shall be in a moment, - protested Nikita as he went shuffling hurriedly off in his old felt boots towards the servants' quarters across the yard.

- Now then, my good Arininshka, give me my coat from the stove! I am going with master! - shouted Nikita as he burst into the hut and seized his belt from a peg.

The cook, who had been enjoying a good sleep after dinner and was now getting tea ready for her husband, greeted Nikita cheerfully, and, catching the infection of his haste, began to bustle about as briskly as he himself. First she took from near the stove a shabby, but well-aired, cloth coat, and set about shaking and smoothing it out with all possible speed.

- You are far more fit to go with the master than I am, - he said to the cook, in accordance with his usual habit of saying something civil to everyone with whom he came in contact.

Then, twisting about him the shabby, well-worn belt, he succeeded first in

compressing his not over-prominent stomach, and then in drawing the belt with a great effort over his fur coat.

- There you are! - He said (not to the cook but to the belt) as he tucked its ends in. - You can't very well burst apart like that. - Then, with a hoist and much heaving of the shoulders, he drew the cloth coat over all (stretching its back well, to give looseness in the arms), and patted it into place under the arm-pits. Finally he took his mittens from a shelf. - Now, - said he, I am all right.

- But you have forgotten about your feet, - cried the cook. - Those boots are with holes.

Nikita stopped as if struck by this.

- Yes, perhaps I ought to change. - He began, but changed his mind, and exclaiming, - Ah, I'll be fine like this – it's not too far!

And he bolted off into the yard.

- But won't you be cold in that coat only, Nikita? - Said his mistress when he reached the sledge.

- Why cold, it is fine, warm, - answered Nikita as he disposed the straw over the forepart of the sledge in such a manner as would conceal his feet after he had mounted, and thrust the whip (not needed for so willing a steed) under the straw.

Vassili had already taken his seat, his broad back, with its double covering of furs, filling almost the entire rear part of the sledge. Then, taking up the reins, he flicked the cob with them, while Nikita jumped into the forepart of the sledge just as it started, and sat leaning forward to the left and sticking out one leg.

II

The good little cob moved the sledge rapidly along with a light creaking of the runners as he trotted at a round pace over the well- beaten, frozen piece of road leading to the village.

- Hullo! What have you jumped up for? - cried Vassili, suddenly, clearly enjoying the fact that an unauthorized passenger was trying to perch himself upon the runners behind. - I'll thrash you, you young rascal! Run along home to your mother!

The boy jumped off. Brownie broke into a gallop, but soon changed to a trot again.

Kresti, where Vassili lived, was a hamlet of six houses only, and when they had got beyond the blacksmith's hut at the end they at once perceived that the wind was much stronger than they had thought it to be, and that the road ahead was almost invisible. The track of the sledge became snowed over almost as fast as made, and only the fact that the road was a little higher than the ground on either side of it rendered it at all distinguishable. The snow was whirling over the whole country-side and blotting out the horizon, while the Teliatinsky forest - generally clearly visible - now showed only as a dark mass looming at intervals through the snow-dust. The wind was blowing from the left, and kept turning Brownie's mane over his thick, fat neck and blowing his feathery tail, - bound at the top in a plain knot, - across his flank. Owing to the wind, too, Nikita's tall coat-collar, where he sat on the weather side of the sledge, kept pressing itself tightly against his cheeks and nose.

- The horse can't get up much of a pace to-day; there's too much snow on the ground, - said Vassili, who prided himself on the excellence of his steed. - Once I drove him to Pashutino in half an hour.

- What did you say? - asked Nikita, whose tall coat-collar had prevented him from hearing what was said.

- I said that I have driven to Pashutino in half an hour, - bawled Vassili.

- That's something to boast of indeed! He's a good animal if ever there was one! - Commented Nikita, after which they kept silence for a while. Vassili, however, was inclined to be talkative.

- What do you think? I told your wife the other day not to let her cooper drink all the tea, - he bawled once more, in the firm conviction that Nikita must be feeling flattered at being talked to by such an important and highly-educated man as himself, as well as so greatly taken with his own joke about the cooper that it never entered into his head that the topic might be distasteful to Nikita. However, the latter had once more failed to catch his master's words for the violence of the wind, so Vassili repeated his pleasantry at the very top of his "educated" voice.

- God be with her, Vassili Andreitch! - returned Nikita when he understood. - I never interfere with their affairs. She has given me little cause for blame, and, so long as she treats the lad well, I merely say, 'God be with her!'

- Well, well, - said Vassili, and changed the subject. - Are you going to buy a horse in the spring? - He continued.

- I only wish I could, - replied Nikita as he turned his coat-collar back a little and leant over towards his master. The new topic interested him, and he wanted to catch every word. - My little lad is fast growing up and ought to learn to plough, but I have squandered all my money.

- Well, if you'll take the low-rumped nag off my hands I won't ask you much for it, - said Vassili, whose spirits were rising, and who therefore recurred instinctively to his ruling passion - the passion which absorbed his whole faculties - namely, the pursuit of bargains.

- I would rather you lent me fifteen roubles and let me go and buy one in the horse-market, - answered Nikita, knowing full well that the low-rumped nag which Vassili was asking him to buy was worth no more than seven roubles at the outside, but that as soon as ever Vassili had handed him over the animal he would swear that it was worth at least twenty-five, and therefore

retain about half a year's wages to cover the amount.

- The horse is a splendid one, - went on Vassili in his precise, business-like tones. - I want to do you a service as well as myself. Honestly, now. Brekhunoff would never do any man a bad turn. I would rather be out of pocket myself than see others so. Yes, on my honour. The horse is a magnificent one.

- I am sure of it, - said Nikita with a sigh. Then, finding it useless to try and listen further, he turned up his coat-collar again, and his face and ear became covered in a twinkling.

For about half an hour they drove in silence. The wind kept getting down Nikita's legs and through a hole in his mitten, but he hunched his shoulders and breathed into the coat-collar muffled over his mouth, so that he did not feel the cold very much after all.

- What do you think? Shall we go round by Karamishevo or straight on? - asked Vassili presently.

The road by way of Karamishevo was the longer and the rougher one, yet, on the other hand, it was clearly defined by posts on either side. The road straight on was a good deal nearer, but used by few travellers, as well as either altogether devoid of posts or marked only by small ones which would now be almost drifted over. Nikita debated matters for a moment.

- The road by Karamishevo is longer than the other one, but a good deal the easier to drive over, - he decided at length.

- Yet, if we go straight on, - pursued Vassili, who was inclined towards the route he named, - we have only to get into the hollow, and then we can't possibly lose our way. It will be splendid going through the forest.

- As you wish, - said Nikita, and turned up his coat collar again.

Accordingly Vassili had his way, and after driving about half a verst[2] further on, turned to the left where a tall young oak tree stood. Its branches

and the few dead leaves which still clung to them were being madly dashed about by the wind, which, after the turning, met the travellers almost full in the face. Light snow began to fall, and Vassili tightened the reins, puffed out his cheeks, and let the breath escape slowly from under his moustache, while Nikita dozed. They had driven like this in silence for about ten minutes when Vassili gave an exclamation.

- What is it? - asked Nikita, opening his eyes.

Vassili returned no answer, but twisted himself round to look back. Then he gazed ahead. The horse was still trotting along, his flanks steaming with sweat.

- What is it? - asked Nikita again.

- What is it, do you say? - cried Vassili in angry mimicry of the question. - Why, only that I can't see any posts now. We must be off the road.

- Wait a minute, then, while I go and look for it, - said Nikita as he leapt lightly from the sledge and, taking the whip from beneath the straw, went ahead and towards the left - the side on which he had been sitting.

The snow had not been very deep that year, so that, as yet, the road had been easily passable the whole way along; but here there were patches where it reached knee-high and smothered Nikita's boot-tops. He kept on trying the ground, both with his feet and the whip, as he walked along; yet the road had vanished.

- Well? - said Vassili when Nikita returned to the sledge.

- No road on this side, - answered Nikita. - I must try the other.

- There seems to be something dark showing ahead, - remarked Vassili. - Go and see what it is.

Nikita did so, and found it to be only a spot where the naked sprouts of some winter corn sown on a piece of black earth were making a dark patch on the

snow as they waved before the wind. Nikita circled round to the right, and then returned to the sledge again, beat the snow from his coat and boots, and remounted.

- We must go to the right, - he said with decision. - The wind was on our left a moment ago, but now it is straight in our faces. Yes, to the right, - he concluded with an air of conviction.

Vassili just managed to catch what he said, and turned the horse in the direction indicated; yet no road revealed itself there, although they went on for a considerable time. Meanwhile the wind showed no signs of dropping, and the snow continued.

- Well, we are altogether lost now, Vassili Andreitch, - observed Nikita, suddenly, and half as though he were pleased at the fact. - What is this, though? - He went on, pointing to a blackened potato top which was projecting above the snow. Vassili at once stopped the horse, which was now sweating heavily and moving its stout flanks with difficulty.

- Yes, what is it? - He echoed.

- It means that we are on the Zakharovek estate. That is where we have got to.

- Surely not? - exclaimed Vassili.

- Yes, it is as I say, - insisted Nikita. - You can tell, too, by the sound of the sledge-runners that we are driving over a potato-field. Look at the bits of potato-tops which they have dragged off. Yes, these are the Zakharovek market-gardens.

- A fine place to get landed in! - said Vassili.

- Well, what is to be done now?

- We must keep on going to the right, and we shall be sure to come out somewhere or other, - answered Nikita. - If we don't actually strike Zakharovek we shall at all events come across some tenant's farm.

Vassili assented, and drove the horse forward in the direction Nikita had advised. They proceeded thus for a considerable time, now coming upon bare grass, now upon rough patches of frozen ground, over which the sledge went grating loudly. Then, again, they would find themselves passing over stubble of winter or spring corn, with the dead straw or sticks of weeds projecting above the snow and waving madly before the wind. More than once they found themselves labouring through deep, level, pure-white drifts, with nothing whatever showing above the top. All the while the snow-fall continued and the snow-dust whirled about the ground. The horse was evidently failing now, for his flanks were white and steaming with sweat, and he proceeded only at a foot's pace. Suddenly he stumbled, and then plunged forward into some ditch or gully. Vassili was for pulling up, but Nikita shouted to him:

- Why stop? Go on, go on! We must get him out of this. Now then, my beauty! Now then, my pet! - He went on to the horse encouragingly as he leapt from the sledge - only to stick fast in the ditch himself. However, the horse extricated himself presently, and scrambled back onto the frozen ridge which lined the bank. Evidently it was a ditch dug out by hand.

- Where are we now? - queried Vassili.

- We must find that out, - answered Nikita. - Let us push on a bit, and we shall arrive somewhere.

- Isn't that the Goviatchkinsky forest, surely? - said his master pointing to something black looming through the snow ahead.

- It may be. We had better push on and find out, rejoined Nikita. As a matter of fact, he had already distinguished the oblong patches of some withered vine-leaves showing against the blackness of the object in question, and knew, therefore, that it was more likely to be a habitation of some kind than a forest; yet he hesitated to speak before he knew for certain. Sure enough, they had not proceeded more than twenty yards beyond the ditch when trees showed up clearly before them and some melancholy sound became audible. Nikita had guessed rightly. It was not a forest they had come to, but a row of

tall vines, with a few withered leaves still quivering upon them. Evidently they marked the trench of a threshing-floor. Just as the travellers had almost reached these vines and could tell that the melancholy sound arose from the wind sweeping through their rustling leaves, the horse took a sudden plunge upwards with his fore hoofs, pulled up his hindquarters after them, turned to the left, and went on with the snow no longer reaching to his knees. It was the road again!

- Now we have reached it! - Exclaimed Nikita, - but the Lord only knows where!

The horse, however, never faltered, but went straight ahead along the snow-swept road; until, just as they had covered about a hundred yards, there uprose before them the rectangular outlines of a wattled barn, with its roof piled with snow and the snow dust blowing from it in clouds. Passing the barn, the road wound back into the wind a little, and they found themselves in a snowdrift. A short way further on could be seen an opening between two buildings, so that it was clear that the road lay through the snowdrift, and that the latter must be surmounted. Sure enough, they had no sooner accomplished this than they found themselves in a village street, in the nearest courtyard of which some frozen linen was hanging from a line and rustling distractedly in the wind. It comprised two shirts (one of them white and the other one red), a pair of drawers, some leggings, and a petticoat, of which the white shirt was particularly abandoned in its antics as it waved its sleeves before the wind.

- Ugh, the lazy woman - though I am sorry to have to say it of her! - said Nikita with a glance at the waving shirts. - To think of not getting one's linen ready for the festival!

III

The wind was as strong at the entrance to the street as it had been in the open country, and the roadway piled with snow, but in the middle of the hamlet everything seemed warm and quiet and cheerful. A dog came barking out of a yard, while in another yard an old woman came running from somewhere, with her head swathed in a handkerchief, but stopped as she was making for the door of the hut and stood for a moment on the threshold to gaze at the new arrivals. From the middle of the village came the sound of girls singing, and altogether there seemed to be less wind and cold and snow here than outside.

- Why, this must be Grishkino, - said Vassili.

- It is, - replied Nikita: and Grishkino it was. It turned out afterwards that they had left the road upon their right, and travelled some eight versts at a tangent to their former direction - though still more or less in the direction of their proper goal. Yet Goviatchkina was fully five versts from Grishkino.

Halfway up the street they encountered a tall man walking in the centre of the roadway.

- Who are you? - He cried as he stopped. Then, recognizing Vassili, he caught hold of one of the shafts, rested his hands upon it, and climbed to the seat of the sledge. It was a friend of Vassili's named Isai, known as the worst horse-thief in the district.

- Well, and whither is God taking you now? - said Isai, suffusing Nikita with the smell of the vodka which he had been drinking.

- We have been trying to get to Goviatchkina.

- What a way to take, then! You should have gone by Malakhovo.

- It's no good saying what we should have done when we didn't do it, - retorted Vassili as he pulled up the horse.

- That is a good animal, - remarked Isai, looking the horse over, and passing his hand under the now drooping stump of its stout, knotted tail in his usual horsey manner. - Are you going to stay the night here?

- No, my friend. We have further to go yet.

- You had much better stay. But who is this? Why, if it isn't Nikita Stepanitch!

- Yes, no one else, - replied Nikita. - But pray tell us, brother, how to avoid losing our way again.

- How to avoid losing your way again? Why, turn back, go right along the street, and the road is straight in front of you. Don't turn to the left, but keep on until you come nearly to a large village, and then - to the right.

- But whereabouts is the turning near that village? - Asked Nikita again. - Is it on the summer or the winter road?

- The winter one. You will come to a copse there, and exactly opposite the copse there stands a tall, ragged oaken post. That is where you are to turn off.

Accordingly Vassili turned the horse's head round, and drove off down the street again.

- You had better have stayed the night here, shouted Isai after them, but Vassili shook up the horse and returned no answer. To cover five versts of level road, of which two would run through forest, seemed an easy enough prospect, especially in view of the fact that the snow now seemed to them to have ceased and the wind to have dropped.

Passing from the street again, with its roadway trampled hard and showing black here and there with patches of fresh dung, they drove past the yard where the linen was hanging out to dry (the white shirt had now partly torn away from the line and was dangling by one frozen sleeve only), and went on until they came to the vine-stocks with their quaintly murmuring leaves. Here they were in the open country again - only to discover that the blizzard had in

no way abated, but rather, on the contrary, increased. The road was drifted over ahead, and nothing but the posts alongside could keep them from leaving it. These posts, too, were difficult to distinguish, since the wind was head on.

Vassili knit his brows as he bent forward to watch for the posts, but gave the horse more rein than before, and trusted to its sagacity. Sure enough, the horse never faltered, but went on turning to the left or right, according to the windings of the road, and feeling for it with his hoofs; so that, despite the fact that the wind kept rising and the snow falling ever thicker and thicker, the posts remained plainly visible on either side.

They had been driving like this for about ten minutes when there suddenly loomed up something black in front of the horse - something which was moving along in a tangled whirl of wind-driven snow. It was a party of fellow-travellers whom Brownie had outpaced, and the back of whose sledge he had actually struck into with his fore-hoofs.

- Pull out! Hi! Look out in front of you! - Came in a chorus of shouts from this vehicle, and Vassili pulled out accordingly.

In the sledge were seated three men and an old woman. Evidently they were guests returning from the village festival. One of the men was lashing the snow-covered flanks of their pony with a dry branch, his two comrades were shouting and gesticulating at one another in the forepart of the sledge, and the old woman - muffled up and white over with snow - was seated motionless at the back.

- Whose men are you? - shouted Vassili.

- A-a-a-skie! - was all that could be heard in answer.

- Eh?

- A-a-a-skie! - Repeated one of the men at the top of his voice, but it was impossible to distinguish precisely what he said.

- Lay on! Don't give way to them! - Shouted another to the one belabouring the pony with the branch.

- You are returning from the festival, I suppose?

- They are gaining, they are gaining! Lay on, Semka! Pull out, you! Lay on!

The sledges kept bumping against each other, almost interlocking, and then parting again, until finally the man's sledge began to be overhauled. Their shaggy, fat-bellied, snow-covered pony, blowing heavily under its low douga, and evidently frantic (though in vain) to escape from the flagellation of the dry branch, kept shuffling along on its stumpy legs through the deep snow, although at times they almost gave way beneath it. Its muzzle - that, apparently, of a young animal, with its lower lip projecting like a fish's, the nostrils distended, and the ears laid back in terror - kept level with Nikita's shoulder for a few seconds, and then began to drop behind.

- That's what drink will make men do, - observed Nikita. - The pony will be ruined by treatment like that. What Asiatic brutes the fellows are!

For several minutes the sobbing of the distressed pony's nostrils could be heard behind them, as well as the drunken shouts of the men. Then the first sound died away, and presently the second also. Nothing whatever was to be heard now except the whistling of the wind in the travellers' ears and an occasional faint scrape of the runners over patches which the wind had swept bare.

This contest with the rival sledge had cheered and enlivened Vassili, so that he drove the horse with greater assurance than ever, and without watching for the posts at all - leaving matters, in fact, to the horse entirely. Nikita also had nothing to do, so that, as usual with him when thus situated, he fell into a doze, in order to make up for arrears of sleep at other times. Suddenly the horse stopped short, almost pitching Nikita forward out of the sledge.

- We have gone wrong again, - said Vassili.

- How do you know?

- Because there are no posts to be seen. We must have left the road.

- Well, if we have, I must look for it again, - remarked Nikita abruptly as he got out and began to trudge about the snow, stepping as lightly as possible on the balls of his splayed-out feet. He kept this up for a long time - now disappearing from view, now reappearing, now vanishing again - and then returned.

- No road there, - he remarked as he mounted the sledge. - It must be somewhere ahead.

The dusk was now coming on, and although the blizzard had not increased it also had not lessened.

- If only we could hear those men! – sighed Vassili.

- They won't overtake us now, - replied Nikita, - for we must have left the road a long way back. Perhaps they have done the same, - he added, as an afterthought.

- Well, which way now? - inquired Vassili.

- Give the horse his head, - advised Nikita, - and perhaps he will take us right. Here, give me the reins.

Vassili relinquished them none the less readily because his hands were half frozen in their warm mittens. Nikita took the reins, but let them lie quite passively in his fingers, endeavouring not to give them the slightest twitch. In fact, he took keen pleasure in thus trying the intelligence of his favourite. Sure enough, after pricking his ears first to the one side and then to the other, the clever animal started to turn round.

- He can almost speak! - cried Nikita. - My word, how well he knows what to do! On you go, then! On with you! Tch, tch!

The wind was now at their backs again, and it seemed warmer.

- Ah, what a knowing fellow he is! - went on Nikita, delighted with his pet. - Kirghizenok is strong enough, of course, but an absolute fool; whereas this fellow - well, see what he found out with his ears alone! No need of telegraphs for him, when he can smell out a road a verst away!

And, indeed, less than half an hour later a black object - either a wood or a village - began to loom ahead, while the posts reappeared on their right, placing it beyond doubt that the travellers had hit the road once more.

- If this isn't Grishkino again! - exclaimed Nikita suddenly.

And Grishkino it was. On their left showed the barn with the snow-dust blowing from its roof, while further on could be seen the clothes-line, with its burden of shirts and drawers still fluttering in the wind. Once again they drove up the street and found everything grow suddenly quiet and warm and cheerful. Once again the miry roadway appeared, voices and singing became audible, and the dog barked as before. The dusk, however, was now so far advanced that lights could be seen gleaming in some of the windows.

Half-way up the street Vassili turned the horse's head towards a large hut with a double coping of bricks, and pulled up at the steps. Nikita approached the gleaming, snow-encrusted window, in the light of which the dancing snowflakes glittered brightly, and knocked at a pane with the butt-end of his whip.

- Who is there? - cried a voice in answer to Nikita's summons.

- The Brekhunoffs from Kresti, brother, - replied Nikita. - Please let us in.

Someone could be heard moving away from the window, and in another two minutes the sound of the inner door opening with a wrench. Then the latch of the outer door rattled, and there came out a tall old white-bearded man, holding the door half-closed behind him to keep the wind from blowing into the hut. He was clad in a fur coat, hastily thrown over a white holiday shirt, while behind him stood a young fellow in a red shirt and tall boots.

- How is it with you, Andreitch? - inquired the old man.

- We have lost our way, my friend, - replied Vassili.

- We tried to get to Goviatchkina, but landed here.

Then we set off again, and have just missed the road for the second time.

- But how came you to go wrong? - asked the old man. - Here, Petrushka, - and he turned to the young fellow in the red shirt - go and open the yard gates.

- Certainly, - responded the youngster cheerfully, and ran forward out of the porch.

- No, no. We must not stop the night, - interposed Vassili.

- But where can you be going now? It is nearly dark. You had much better stay here.

- I should have been only too glad to do so, but I simply cannot. Business, you see, my friend - and business won't wait.

- Then at least come in and warm yourselves with some tea, - said the old man.

- Yes, we might do that, - replied Vassili. - The night won't grow any darker than it is now, for the moon will soon be rising. Shall we go in and warm ourselves, Nikita?

- Yes, I could do with something to warm me, - f replied Nikita, who was desperately cold, and only too eager to thaw his frozen limbs before a stove.

Vassili thereupon entered the hut with the old man, while Nikita drove the sledge through the yard-gates, duly opened for him by Petrushka. Under the latter's guidance he then led the horse under the roof of a shed. The shed was heaped high with dung, so that the horse's lofty douga caught upon a beam; whereupon the cock and hens which were roosting there were moved to uneasy flutterings and scratchings of their claws, some sheep darted away in

terror, with much pattering of their hoofs over the frozen dung, and a dog whined loudly, then growled in angry alarm, and finally barked at the intruder in puppy fashion.

Nikita had a word for them all. He begged the hens' pardon, and quieted them by saying that he would not disturb them further; chided the sheep for their unreasoning nervousness; and never ceased to make overtures to the dog as he tied up his steed.

- We shall be all right now, - he said as he beat the snow from his clothes. - Hush, then, how he growls! - He added to the dog. - It is all right now. Quiet, then, stupid! Be quiet! You are only disturbing yourself for nothing. We are not thieves.

- They are what we might call our three domestic councillors, - remarked Petrushka as he drew the sledge under the shed with his powerful hands.

- Why councillors? - asked Nikita.

- Because, - said Petrushka, with a smile, - you will find it written in Paulson's book: "When a thief is sneaking up to a house the dog barks out in his own language - Wake up! the cock sings out - Get up! and the cat starts washing herself - meaning thereby to say: A guest is at hand, so let us be ready to receive him!"

Petrushka, it seemed, was of a literary turn, and knew by heart the only book which he possessed - some book or other by Paulson. He was particularly fond of it when he had had a little to drink - as now - and would quote such extracts from it as might seem to him to fit the occasion.

- That is just right, - observed Nikita.

- Yes, isn't it? - answered Petrushka. - But you are simply frozen. Shall I take you in to tea now, my boy?

- Yes, by all means, - replied Nikita, and they crossed the yard to the hut door.

IV

The homestead where Vassili had pulled up was one of the richest in the village, for the family held no less than five lots of land, as well as rented some, while in the stables stood six horses, three cows, two draught-bullocks, and a flock of twenty sheep. In all, there lived around the courtyard of the homestead twenty-two souls - namely, four married sons, six grandchildren (of whom one - Petrushka - was married), two great-grandchildren, three orphans, and four daughters-in-law, with their children. In addition to these there were two sons employed as watercarriers in Moscow, while a third was in the army. At the present moment there were at home only the old man, his wife, the second of the married sons, the elder of the two sons who worked at Moscow (come over for the festival), the various wives and children, and a neighbouring gossip.

It was one of those rare households which are still to be found undivided, yet one in which there were already at work those deep-rooted internal dissensions which generally originate among the women of a family, and which would break up this family also in time. Over the table in the hut there hung a shaded lamp, throwing a clear light upon the crockery below, upon a bottle of vodka, and upon sundry viands, as well as over the clay walls of the room. In one corner - the "corner beautiful" - there hung some icons, with pictures on either side of them. In the place of honour at the table sat Vassili, stripped now to his black under-jacket, and chewing his frozen moustache as he gazed round the hut and at those about him with his prominent, hawk like eyes. Next to him sat the bald, white-bearded head of the family (dressed in a white shirt of home manufacture), while, further on, were the son who had come over from Moscow for the festival (straight-backed, square-shouldered, and wearing a similar shirt to his father's, but of finer material), a second square-shouldered son (the eldest of those living at home), and, lastly, the neighbour a red-haired, lanky man.

These men had had their supper and vodka, and were just about to drink tea when the travellers arrived. Consequently, the samovar on the floor by the stove was already boiling. Near the stove, also, and in shelf-bunks could be

seen various children, while the old woman - her face covered in every direction with fine wrinkles, furrowing even her lips - bustled about behind Vassili.

As Nikita entered the hut she was just taking her guest some vodka, which she had poured out into a tumbler of thick glass.

- You must not refuse it, Vassili Andreitch, - she said. - No, you really must not. You need something to refresh you. Drink it down, my dear sir.

Nikita found himself greatly excited by the smell of the vodka - especially now that he was so cold and hungry. He knit his brows and, shaking the snow from his hat and coat, halted for a moment before the icons, with his eyes turned away from the company. He crossed himself three times and made a genuflexion, after which he turned first to his host and saluted him, then to those present at the table, and then to the women standing by the stove. Finally, with a general greeting of "A merry festival to you all!" he started to take off his coat - though still without looking at the table.

- But you are frozen all over, my brother! - cried the eldest brother as he stared at Nikita's snow-caked eyes, beard and face.

For answer, Nikita divested himself of his coat, shook it out, and hung it over the stove; after which he at length approached the table. Offered vodka, he had almost taken the glass and tilted the fragrant, shining liquor into his mouth, when he glanced at Vassili and remembered the pawned boots, as well as the cooper and the young son for whom he had promised to buy a horse in the spring. So he ended by declining the vodka with a sigh.

- I would rather not drink it, I thank you humbly, - he said with knitted brows, and seated himself on a bench by the window.

- But why? - asked the eldest brother.

- Because I would rather not, I would rather not, - Nikita replied without raising his eyes as he squinted down at his short beard and moustache and thawed the icicles out of them.

- It does not suit him, - put in Vassili, smacking his lips over a cracknel washed down with vodka.

- Well, give me the tea-pot, then, - said the kindly old woman. - I will get you some tea, for you must be frozen. Why are you so long with the samovar, my good women?

- It is quite ready, - retorted one of the younger ones as she wiped the covered samovar with a napkin.

Then, raising it with some difficulty, she came and plumped it down on the table. Meanwhile, Vassili had been relating how he and his companion had missed their way, wandered about, fallen in with the drunken men, and twice returned to the village. His hosts marvelled at the story, and then went on to explain how and where they had gone wrong, who the drunken men had been, and the route which Vassili and Nikita must take when they set off again.

- Why, even a child could find the way as far as Moltchanovka, - said the neighbour, - and, once there, you only have to hit the turning near the village. You will see a copse there. To think that you never got so far!

- But hadn't you better stay the night here? - put in the old woman, persuasively. - The women shall get you a bed ready.

- Yes, do so, for if you were to get lost again it might be a terrible business, - added her husband.

- No, no, I really cannot, my good friend, - replied Vassili. - Business is business. Delay an hour, and you lose a year, - he added, remembering the timber and the rival buyers who might forestall him, - Shall we go now? - He turned to Nikita.

Nikita returned no answer for a moment, and seemed absorbed in the task of thawing out his beard and moustache. At length he muttered gruffly:

- It would hardly do to get lost again, would it?

As a matter of fact, he was gruff because he wanted the vodka so badly, and the only thing which would assuage that yearning of his was tea - which he had not yet been offered.

- But we need only to reach that turning, - protested Vassili, - and we simply can't lose our way afterwards.

From there onwards it will be all forest road.

- Well, it is for you to say, Vassili Andreitch, - said Nikita as he took the tumbler of tea now proffered him. - If we must go, we must, that's all.

- Drink up the tea, then, and quick march.

Nikita said no more (although he shook his head disapprovingly), but poured the tea out carefully into the saucer and began to warm his work-swollen fingers in the steam. Then, having bitten off a crumb from his lump of sugar, he bowed to his hosts, said:

- A good health to you all! - And poured the grateful liquid down his throat.

- If only we had someone to guide us to the turning! - sighed Vassili.

- That could be managed, - said the eldest brother.

- Petrushka could harness a horse and go with you as far as that.

- Harness up, then, brother, and my best thanks to you, - exclaimed Vassili.

- And to you also, good sir, - said the hospitable old woman. - We have been only too pleased to see you.

- Petrushka, off you go and harness the mare, ordered the eldest brother.

- Very well, - replied Petrushka smilingly as he seized his cap from a peg and departed.

Whilst the horses were being got ready the conversation passed to the subject

which had been interrupted when Vassili drove up to the window. It seemed that the old man had been complaining to the neighbour (who was also the local starosta[3]) about his third son, who had sent him no gift for the festival, but had given his wife a French shawl.

- The young people are getting out of hand nowadays, said the old man.

- Indeed they are! - agreed the neighbour. - There is no living with them. They are growing much too clever. Look at Demotchkin, who broke his father's arm the other day - all through his being too clever, of course!

Nikita kept listening and looking from one to the other of the speakers' faces with an evident desire to join in the conversation, but he was too full of tea to do so, and therefore merely nodded his head approvingly at intervals. He had drunk tumbler after tumbler of tea, until he had grown warmer and warmer and more and more good-humoured. The conversation lasted for quite a long time on this subject - on the evil of dividing up families - and proved too absorbing to be successfully diverted, so that in time it passed to the dissensions in this particular household - to the separation which the second son (who had been sitting by meanwhile and maintaining a sullen silence) was demanding. Evidently it was a moot point, and the question above all others which was exercising the household, yet politeness had hitherto prevented the family from discussing such a private affair before strangers. At length, however, the old man could not forbear, and with tears in his voice went on to say that, so long as he lived, he would never permit the separation; that he maintained his household to the glory of God; and that, once it were divided, it would become scattered all over the world.

- Yes, that is what happened to the Matvieffs, observed the neighbour. - They were a comfortable household once, but separated - and now not a single one of them has anything left.

- That is what you desire for us, I suppose? - said the old man, turning to his son.

The son returned no answer, and an awkward silence ensued until interrupted by Petrushka, who had duly harnessed his horse and been back in the hut for

some minutes past, smiling the whole time.

- It reminds me of a fable in Paulson, - he said.

- A father gave his son a broom to tear across. None of them could tear it: but, twig by twig - well, that was easy enough. So also it will be in our case, - he added with a broad smile. - But I am quite ready to start now.

- Then, if you are ready, let us be off, - said Vassili. - About that separation, good grandfather - do not give in. It is you who have made the household, and therefore it should be you who are master of it. If necessary, refer the matter to the mirovoi.[4] He would settle it for you.

- But to behave like this, to behave like this! - cried the old man, with unrestrained grief. - There is no living with them. It is the Devil's doing entirely.

Meanwhile Nikita, his fifth tumbler of tea swallowed, had placed the empty glass by his side instead of returning it, in the hope that he would be given a sixth. But there was no more water left in the samovar, and so the hostess brewed no more tea, while Vassili was already putting his fur coat on. Accordingly, there being nothing else for it, Nikita rose, replaced his lump of sugar (which he had nibbled on every side) in the sugar-basin, wiped his perspiring face with the lapet of his jacket, and went to put on his coat. This done, he sighed heavily. Then he thanked and took leave of his hosts, and left the warm, bright living-room for the cold, dark porch, which was rattling with the wind which hurtled through it and which had drifted the snow through the chinks of the quaking outer door until it lay in heaps upon the floor. Thence he passed into the dark courtyard.

Petrushka, clad in a sheepskin jacket, was standing by his horse in the middle of the yard and smilingly quoting some verses from Paulson: "The lowering tempest hides the sky, The whirlwind brings the driving snow; Now like a wild beast it doth cry, Now like a child it whimpers low."

Nikita nodded his head approvingly and unhooked the reins, while the old man brought a lantern into the porch to guide Vassili to the sledge. He tried

to light him with it, but it was blown out in a twinkling. Even in the yard it was easy to tell that the storm was worse than ever.

- What fearful weather! - thought Vassili to himself. - Perhaps we shall never get there. However, there is business to be thought of. Besides, I have got myself ready now, and my host's horse has been put in. God send we get there, though!

The host, old man, likewise was thinking that it would be better for them not to set out, but he had already tried to dissuade them, and they had not listened to him. It would be no use asking them again. "Perhaps, too, it is only old age which makes me so nervous, and they will arrive safely," - he thought. - "Let us ourselves at least go to bed in the meanwhile. Enough of talking for to-night."

Petrushka, at all events, had no thought of danger. Pie knew the road and the whole neighbourhood too well for that. Moreover, he had been greatly put upon his mettle by the couplet about the whirlwind and the snow, which seemed to him to describe with extraordinary exactness what was to be seen in the yard. As for Nikita, he had no wish to go at all, but he had been too long accustomed not to have his own way and to serve others; so that in the end there was no one to prevent them from setting out.

V

Vassili walked through the porch, peered about in the darkness till he discerned where the sledge was, took the reins, and climbed in.

- All right in front! - He cried. Petrushka, kneeling in his own sledge, started his horse, and Brownie, with a loud neigh as he scented the mare in front of him, dashed away after her. They issued thus into the village street, passed the outskirts, and took the same road as before - the road which ran past the yard with the frozen linen (although the linen was quite invisible now), past the barn heaped with snow, and from the gables of which a cloud of snow-dust kept blowing, and past the bending vines with their mysterious murmurings and pipings. Then once more the travellers were launched upon a sea of snow, which raged both above and below them. The wind was so strong that when it was upon their flank and their wrappings filled before it, it actually careened the sledge to one side and threw the horse out of his stride. Petrushka kept shouting encouragement as he drove his stout mare ahead of them, while the horse followed her closely.

After about ten minutes' driving, Petrushka turned aside and shouted something, but neither Vassili nor Nikita could tell what he said for the sound of the wind. They guessed, however, that they had reached the turning. Sure enough, Petrushka had wheeled to the right, and the wind, which had hitherto been chiefly on their flank, now met them full in the face, whilst something could be seen showing black through the snow on their right hand. It was the copse which marked the turning.

- God go with you! - cried Petrushka.

- Thank you, thank you, Petrushka!

- The lowering tempest hides the sky, - shouted the lad once more, and vanished.

- Goodness, what a poetry-spouter! - remarked Vassili as he started the horse

again.

- Yes, he is a fine young fellow, a real honest man, - returned Nikita, and they went on.

In order not to squander the warmth engendered by the tea which he had drunk in the hut, Nikita wrapped himself up well, hunched his shoulders until his short beard covered his throat, and sat perfectly silent. In front of him he could see the two dark lines of the shafts forever cheating his eye, and looking to him like the ruts of a beaten road; the horse's tossing flank and knotted, wind-blown tail; and, further ahead, the animal's lofty douga, nodding head and neck, and dishevelled mane. At intervals posts would leap into sight, and he would know that the sledge was still keeping the road and that there was nothing for him to do. Vassili held the reins loosely, leaving it to the horse to guide himself. Nevertheless, although Brownie had had a long rest in the village, he went unwillingly, and as though he would like to turn aside at any moment, so that Vassili frequently had to straighten him again.

- There goes a post on the right - two - three, counted Vassili. - And there is the forest in front, he went on to himself as he gazed at something showing dark ahead of them. However, what had seemed to him a forest proved to be only a bush. This they passed, and had covered another fifty yards or so - when, behold! There was neither forest nor a fourth post to be seen!

- Never mind; we shall be at the forest in a moment, - thought Vassili as, excited by the vodka and tea, he jerked the reins again instead of pulling up. The willing, docile animal obeyed and, now at an amble and now at a moderate trot, went whither he was driven, although he knew that it was in the wrong direction. Another ten minutes passed, and still there was no forest.

- We have missed the road again! - exclaimed Vassili, at last pulling up. Without speaking, Nikita descended from the sledge, and, after tucking up his coat, which sometimes clung to him and sometimes flapped up and down, according to the strength of the gusts of wind, began to flounder about over the snow. First he tried the one side, and then the other, and thrice vanished altogether. At last, however, he returned, and took the reins from Vassili's

hands.

- We must go towards the right, - he said brusquely and decisively as he turned the horse in that direction.

- Very well; if to the right, to the right, - agreed Vassili as he surrendered the reins and thrust his numbed hands up his sleeves.

Nikita said nothing more beyond crying,

- Now do your best, my pet! – Nikita said to the horse. Nevertheless, the animal moved forward only at a foot's pace, in spite of all Nikita's shaking of the reins.

The snow was knee-deep in places, and the sledge moved through it in jerks with each stride of the animal. Presently Nikita took up the whip, which had been hanging over the splash-board, and used it once; whereupon the good horse, unused to its lash, plunged forward and broke into a trot - only, however, to subside again into an alternative amble and walk. They proceeded thus for about five minutes. It was so dark, and there was such a swirl of snow both around them and on the ground, that it was scarcely possible for them even to see the horse's douga. Sometimes, indeed, it was almost as though the sledge were standing still and the ground gliding backwards from it. Suddenly the horse stopped short, as though he had scented something in front of him. Nikita threw down the reins and leapt lightly out, in order to go to the horse's head and see what he was jibbing at; but hardly had he taken a single stride ahead of the animal when his legs shot up and he rolled down some steep declivity.

- Phew, phew, phew! - he kept exclaiming all the time he was descending and trying in vain to stop himself, but his course was only arrested when his legs ploughed their way into a deep snowdrift at the bottom, while, shaken by his struggles, the drift overhanging the bank above him descended upon his head and crammed a large portion of its mass down the back of his neck.

- What a one you are, then! - said Nikita, reproachfully, both to the snowdrift and to the ravine, as he attempted to shake the snow out of his coat-collar.

- Nikita, Nikita! - came in a shout from Vassili above, but Nikita sent no answering call. He was too busy for that, for he was employing all his energies in shaking himself and searching for the whip, which had rolled away somewhere while he was shooting down the declivity. Having found it at last, he tried to re-ascend at the spot where he had come down, but found it impossible to do so, since he merely slid back with each successive attempt; so that finally he was forced to proceed along the bottom to find a way out. Nevertheless, only a few yards from the point where he had descended he found a place where he managed to creep up on all fours, after which he began to walk along the edge towards the spot where he judged the horse to be. Both horse and sledge were wholly invisible, but inasmuch as he was walking against the wind, he could hear Vassili's shouts and Brownie's welcoming neigh some moments before he actually caught sight of them.

- I am coming, I am coming, - he exclaimed. – Why make such a fuss about it?

It was not until he was almost upon the sledge that he was able to distinguish the horse, with Vassili standing beside it - the latter looming very large in the obscurity.

- How the devil did you manage to lose yourself? - began his master, angrily.

- We must turn back and at least try to return to Grishkino.

- I should be only too glad, - retorted Nikita.

- But which way are we to go? If we fall into this ravine we might never get out of it again. I myself have just found it pretty hard to do so.

- Yet we cannot stay here, can we? We must go somewhere, - retorted Vassili.

Nikita said nothing, but sat down on the rim of the sledge, pulled off his boots, and shook out the snow which had collected in them. That done, he gathered up a handful of straw and carefully plugged a hole in the left one.

Vassili also said nothing, as though he meant now to leave everything to

Nikita. When the latter had finished pulling on his boots again, he tucked his legs onto the sledge, put on his mittens, took up the reins, and turned the horse parallel to the ravine. They had not gone more than a hundred yards, however, before the animal pulled up short. In front of them lay the ravine again!

Once more Nikita got out and went probing about over the snow. He was absent for some time, but at length reappeared on the opposite side of the sledge to that which he had started from.

- Are you there, Andreitch? - He shouted.

- Yes, - replied Vassili. - Well, what now?

- There is no getting out this way; it is too dark, and there are too many ravines about. We must try driving back against the wind.

After doing so for a little while they stopped, and Nikita once more alighted and went creeping about over the snow. Then he remounted, but only to alight again almost immediately; until at length he came to a halt by the sledge in a perfectly breathless condition.

- Well, what? - inquired Vassili.

- Only that I am fairly done, and the horse nearly so too.

- What are we to do, then?

- Wait a minute. - Nikita departed again, but returned in a moment or two.

- Keep close behind me, - he cried as he walked on before the horse. Vassili had now ceased to give orders, but humbly obeyed Nikita's directions.

- This way - after me, - cried the latter again as he turned sharply to the right and, taking Brownie by the head, led him downwards towards a snowdrift. The horse held back at first, and then made a plunge forward as though to leap the snowdrift. Failing in the attempt, he sank in up to the collar.

- Get out of the sledge, - cried Nikita to Vassili, who had retained his seat meanwhile. Then, grasping one of the shafts, he exerted all his strength to help the horse to drag the sledge out of the drift. - Pull, my pet! - He cried to Brownie. - One good pull and the thing is done. Now, now! Just one good pull!

The horse made a brave effort, and yet another, but, failing to extricate himself, settled down as though to reflect upon the situation.

- Come, come, my pet; this won't do, - Nikita adjured Brownie. - Now then, once again! - And he tugged at the shaft on his side, while Vassili tugged at the other. The horse shook his head for a moment, and then plunged forward suddenly in another attempt.

- That's it! You're not going to be buried this time, eh? - cried Nikita, encouragingly.

Another plunge - a second - a third - and the horse had cleared the drift and stopped short, shaking himself all over and breathing heavily. Nikita was for dragging the sledge a little further yet, but Vassili was so exhausted with the weight of his two heavy coats that he gave up and climbed in again.

- Let me rest a minute, - he said, as he loosened the handkerchief which he had wound round his coat collar before leaving the village.

- Very well; there is no great hurry, - returned Nikita. - Sit still, and I will lead the horse.

Accordingly Vassili remained in the sledge, while Nikita led the animal forward for about ten yards, down a slope, then up again a little way, and finally came to a halt.

The spot where he had done so was not actually in the ravine itself, where the snow blowing off the hillocks and accumulating might have buried them entirely, but in a spot partly sheltered by the lee side of the ravine.

Occasionally the wind seemed to drop a little, but it was not for long; whilst, as if to make up for such lulls, the blizzard would increase ten-fold after they

were over, and tear and swirl around the travellers more cruelly than ever. One of these violent gusts struck the sledge just as Vassili was descending from it to go and take counsel with Nikita as to what they should do next, with the result that they could only cower down without speaking until the fury of the squall was spent. As for Brownie, he flattened his ears and shook his head in disgust. When the squall had abated a little, Nikita took off his mittens, tucked them into his belt, blew upon his hands, and set to work to unfasten the bow-rein from the douga.

- Why are you doing that? - asked Vassili.

- Because there is nothing else to be done, - replied Nikita, though half-apologetically. - I am absolutely tired out now.

- Then aren't we going to try and get any further?

- No, for we are only exhausting the horse for nothing, - said Nikita, pointing to the animal where it stood patiently waiting for what might be required of it, yet scarcely able to hold itself upright on its stout, sweat-belathered flanks.

- Brownie is willing enough, but he can hardly stand on his legs. There is nothing for it but to spend the night here.

Nikita said this as if he were proposing to put up in an inn-yard, and went on unfastening the collar-thong until the two clasps of the collar fell apart.

- But we shall freeze to death here! - cried Vassili.

- Well? What if we do? It cannot be helped, was all that Nikita vouchsafed to reply.

VI

Vassili was warm enough in his two heavy coats, especially after his exertions in the snowdrift. Yet, for all that, the frost seemed to breathe down his back when he understood that they had to spend the night there. To calm his apprehensions, he sat down in the sledge and pulled out his matches and cigarettes. Meanwhile Nikita unharnessed the horse. He undid the belly-band and saddle-piece, ran the reins out, unfastened the traces, and took off the douga, talking cheerily to the animal the while.

- Out you come, out you come, - he said as he led it out of the shafts. - Let me take off your bit and tie you up here, and then you shall have some straw. He suited the action to the word. - Eat away, and you will feel all the better for it.

Nevertheless, Brownie did not seem to grow easier under Nikita's touch, but kept fidgeting about as he stood tail onward to the wind. Every moment he would shift his legs, press up to the sledge, and rub his head against Nikita's sleeve. However, as if unwilling to seem churlish about the meal of straw which Nikita had strewn before his nose, he took an occasional straw from the sledge, but appeared at once to come to the conclusion that straw did not meet the case, and threw it down again; whereupon the wind caught it in a twinkling, whirled it away, and buried it in the snow.

- Suppose we make a signal of distress, - said Nikita, presently. He turned the sledge a little towards the wind, tied the shafts together with the belly-band, turned them up, and rested them against the splashboard. - Now, if anyone passes this way they will be able to see us by the shafts, and come and dig us out. I learned that trick from the old people, - and he clapped his mittens together and put them on.

Meanwhile Vassili had unhooked his fur coat and made a shelter of its skirts. Then he struck match after match against the steel match-box, but his hands were shaking so violently with the cold that each successive match either failed to light at all or was blown out by the wind as he was in the act of lifting it to his cigarette. At length a match did flare up properly, illuminating

for a brief second the pelt of his fur coat, his hand with the gold ring on its curved index finger, and the snow-covered straw which projected from under the sacking. The cigarette lighted, he drew a couple of greedy whiffs, swallowed the smoke, and puffed it out again through his mustache. Then he was about to take a third whiff, when the wind caught the lighted end of the cigarette and carried it away to join the wisps of straw!

Nevertheless, even these meager mouthfuls of smoke had exercised a cheering effect upon him.

- If we must spend the night here, well, we must, that's all, he said undauntedly. - Wait a moment and I will rig up a flag. Picking up the handkerchief which he had unwound from his neck and thrown down upon the floor of the sledge, he took off his mittens, climbed onto the splash-board, stretched himself on tiptoe to reach the belly-band, and tied the handkerchief round one end of it and of the shaft in a stout knot. The handkerchief at once began to wave wildly - now clinging to the shaft, now suddenly filling out again and straining at the knot as its folds cracked in the wind.

- Is not that clever of me? - said Vassili as he stepped down again, much pleased with his handiwork.

- Now, if we could lie together, that would be the warmest way, but I'm afraid that there isn't room for both of us.

- Never mind; I will find a place for myself, - answered Nikita. - Only, I must cover the horse over first, for he has been sweating a lot and is tired out. Wait a minute, - and, diving into the sledge, he dragged the sacking from under Vassili. Possessed of this, he folded it double, and, removing the saddle-piece and crupper from Brownie's back, covered him over.

- You will be warmer like this, little fool, - he said as he replaced the saddle-piece and crupper. - And now, - he added to Vassili, - I will take the apron if you don't want it to-night. Give me some straw, too, - and, thus taking one thing and another from beneath Vassili, he went to the back of the sledge, dug a hole in the snow there, and lined it with straw. Then he pulled his cap over his eyes, wrapped his coat about him, with the apron over all, and

squatted down upon the straw with his back resting against the bark tail-board of the sledge, that it might protect him from the wind and snow.

Vassili shook his head in disapproval of Nikita's proceedings (it was contrary to his habit to encourage the peasantry in their rude, uncouth ways), and then set about making his own preparations for the night. First of all, he smoothed out what straw was left in the sledge, padding it a little thicker where his thigh bone was to rest. Then he pulled on his mittens and lay down with his head in one of the corners near the splash-board, that the latter might protect him from the wind.

Somehow he did not feel sleepy, but lay thinking. He thought chiefly of the one thing which constituted his whole pride, ideal, aim and joy in life - namely, the making of money, and yet more money. He thought of the means by which certain acquaintances of his had made their money, how they were using it, and the means by which he, like they, might make a great deal more than he already possessed. The purchase of the Goviatchkinsky forest seemed to him a matter of vast importance, since out of this forest he hoped to make, at one stroke, a sum, possibly, of ten thousand roubles. He mentally reckoned up the value of the timber which he had viewed in the autumn, and on the basis of the two dessiatins[5] he had then inspected went on to calculate the whole.

- The oak-wood will do for sledge-runners if cut up, and for beams as they stand, - he said to himself. - And after they are felled there should be left about 30 sazhen[6] of firewood to the dessiatin. - Thus calculating, he could see that the total value of the forest worked out at about 12,000 roubles, but could not reckon to an exact figure in the absence of tables. - All the same, - he went on, - I am not going to give even so much as 10,000 for it - only 8000 - and that subject to deductions for open spaces. I will grease the surveyor's palm with a hundred roubles, or perhaps a hundred and fifty, and he will measure me off the clearings at least five dessiatins. Yes the owner will be glad to let the forest go at 8000 roubles. I have 3000 ready for him here, - thought Vassili as he felt for his pocketbook with the inside of his forearm; - and that should melt him. How on earth we came to miss that turning God only knows. There must be a forest and a forest-keeper

somewhere about there. His dog ought to have heard us. The cursed brutes never bark when they're wanted to. He turned back his coat-collar from his ear and listened. Nothing was to be heard but the whistling of the wind, the rustling and cracking of the handkerchief on the shafts, and the swish of the snow as it lashed the bark sides of the sledge. He covered his ear over again.

- If only I had known that we should have to spend the night here! - He thought. - Well, we shall get there to-morrow, all the same. It will only mean one day lost. Besides, those other fellows wouldn't come either - not in such weather. Suddenly he remembered that on the 9th of the month he was to be paid some money for rams by the butcher. I ought to be back by then to receive it. He couldn't take me in over the price, whereas my wife doesn't in the least know how to bargain. In fact, she doesn't understand how to talk to anyone, - he went on as he remembered her failure to make conversation to the stanovoi[7], who had been one of their guests of yesterday for the festival. - She is a woman - that is the long and the short of it. Moreover, what had she ever seen before I married her? Her father was only a well-to-do man. A shabby little farm - that was all his property. But what have I not acquired in fifteen years? A store, two taverns, a mill, a granary, two rented holdings, and an iron-roofed villa and warehouse combined." He swelled with pride. - Rather different to her father, I think! In fact, who is the chief man in the district to-day? Why, Vassili Brekhunoff, of course!

- And why so? - He continued presently. - Because I devote my whole attention to business and work hard - not like some people who lie abed and play the fool. I don't sleep whole nights away. No. Blizzard or no blizzard, out I go if necessary, and my business gets done. They think me a fool, and laugh at my money-making: but never mind, Vassili - go on working hard, even if it makes your head ache. If necessary, spend a night in the open like this rather than lose time. Never mind if you cannot sleep, either. To be able to think such thoughts is a pillow in itself, - he concluded proudly. - Some people seem to think that riches come to one by chance. Pooh! There is only one Mironoff in a million. No. Work hard, and God will give you the rest. If only He give you health and strength, that alone should be sufficient.

And the mere thought that he might one day become such a millionaire as

Mironoff, who had risen from nothing, so fired Vassili with ecstasy that he yearned to have someone to speak to. Yet there was no one. Ah, but, once he could win to Goviatchkina, he would have a landowner to speak to - and to bamboozle as well!

- Good heavens, how it blows! - He continued as he listened to a squall of wind which was beating against the splashboard and bending it inwards as it lashed the bark planking with snow. - It is drifting the snow so much that perhaps we shall never get out in the morning.

Nothing could be seen in the white swirl of obscurity but Brownie's dark head and tail and the sack covering his back. At intervals the wind would toss the corners of the sack aloft, while in front and behind and on either side of the sledge whirled the same uniform mass of whiteness - now lightening a little, now suddenly becoming denser.

- I was a fool ever to have listened to Nikita, - he thought. - We ought to have gone on again, and we should have landed somewhere. We might have reached Grishkino again, and been able to put up at Tarass's place after all. Yet here we have to stick all night! What is the good of that? God gives to those who help themselves, but not to loafers, sluggards and fools. I must try smoking again.

He sat up, got out a cigarette, and then rolled over on his stomach to shield the flame of the match from the wind with the flap of his coat. Yet the wind found an entry somehow, and blew out the matches, one by one. At length he contrived to keep one alight, and started smoking. He felt greatly pleased with his success, and although the wind got more of the smoke than he did, he managed to draw three whiffs, and was much cheered by them. He rolled himself back into a sitting posture, wrapped himself up again, and started once more to think over and consider matters; until suddenly, and without warning, he lost consciousness and went off into a doze.

All at once something seemed to jostle him, and he awoke. It might have been Brownie pulling away straw from beneath him or it might have been the result of some internal disturbance, but at all events he awoke - and with his

heart beating so fast and so furiously that the very sledge seemed to be shaking under him. He opened his eyes. The scene around him appeared exactly the same, except that it seemed lighter.

- It must be the dawn, - he thought to himself. - It will soon be morning now.

Then all at once he remembered that the fact of its getting lighter could only mean that the moon was rising. He raised himself again, and looked at the horse. Brownie was standing with his hindquarters to the wind, and shaking all over. The snow-heaped sacking was turned up over his back on the windward side, and the crupper was slipping down over his flank, while his snow-powdered head and wind-tossed mane and forehead-tuft were more clearly visible than before. As for Nikita, he was still squatting in the same position as when he had first sat down, with his feet and the apron with which he had covered his head all piled with snow.

- A peasant never freezes, - thought Vassili as he bent over the back of the sledge and looked at him. - No, not for all his poor clothes. He can be trusted for that. Yet the peasants are a stupid lot - a mere welter of ignorance.

For a moment he thought of taking the sacking off the horse's back and covering Nikita over with it, but it was too cold to get up and make the effort. Moreover, he was afraid of the horse starving if he did.

- What on earth did I take Nikita for? - He reflected. - I have her stupidity to thank for it all, (he was thinking of his wife). Then he rolled back into his former position by the splashboard. - My uncle spent a night in the snow like this, - he went on, - yet he took no harm. Sebastian, too, once had to be dug out, - he continued as another instance occurred to him. - Sebastian died, though, for he was frozen stiff as a carcase. If only we had stayed at Grishkino!

Wrapping his coat more carefully about him, so that the protection of the fur should not be wasted at any point, but keep him warm from head to heels, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep again. Yet, for all his efforts, he could not succeed, but, on the contrary, continued absolutely alert and wakeful. Once more he began to make business calculations and to run over his outstanding

debts. Once more, too, he began to appraise himself and to congratulate himself on his position in the world.

None the less, his every thought seemed to be broken in upon by a sort of haunting fear, as well as by a feeling of vexation that they had not stayed at Grishkino.

- To think of it! - He murmured. - - Way, at this moment I might have been lying in a warm bed!

More than once he turned himself over and resettled himself, in a vain endeavour to find an easier position and one more protected from the wind, but each new posture proved more uncomfortable than the last. At length he raised himself again, changed his position altogether, wrapped his legs up carefully, closed his eyes, and tried to lie perfectly still. Yet, either his feet, squeezed into their stiff top-boots, had begun to ache, or the wind was catching him somewhere, but at all events he had not been lying long in this position before he found himself angrily remembering that at this very moment he might have been lying in a warm hut at Grishkino. Again he raised himself, again he wrapped his coat about him, and resettled himself. Once he thought he heard the far-off sound of cocks crowing, whereupon he turned down the collar of his coat in a tremor of joy and listened attentively; yet, for all his straining of his ears, he could hear nothing but the whistling of the wind through the shafts, the flapping of the handkerchief, and the lashing of the snow against the bark sides of the sledge.

As for Nikita, he remained squatting as he had done since the previous evening. Never once had he stirred, nor returned any answer to Vassili's shouts, although the latter had called to him more than once.

- He seems to have no difficulty in sleeping, thought Vassili with irritation as he leant over the back of the sledge and looked at the snow-covered Nikita.

In all, Vassili must have got up and lain down again at least twenty times. It seemed to him as if the night would never end.

- Surely it must be nearly morning now? - He thought once as he raised

himself and glanced about him. - How would it be to look at my watch? But no; I might get frozen if I unhooked my coat. Yet, once I knew that it was drawing towards morning, things would seem better, and we would set about harnessing the horse.

In the depths of his soul, however, Vassili knew quite well that it could not be near morning yet. The truth was that his nervous panic was increasing to such an extent that he wished both to verify his supposition and to deceive himself. In the end he finished by carefully unhooking his fur coat, thrusting his hand in, and groping about till he dug down to his waistcoat. A further series of efforts enabled him to draw out his silver watch, with its enamelled chasing of flowers. Then he tried to look at it, but nothing could be seen without a light. Once more he lay down upon his elbows and stomach (as he had done when getting ready to smoke), pulled out his matches, and set about striking one. By this time he had grown more expert at the business, and, feeling for the match with the largest head of sulphur, he contrived to light it at the first attempt. Then, thrusting the dial of the watch under the light, he looked at it, and could hardly believe his eyes! It was only ten minutes past one! The whole night lay before him!

- Oh, the long, long night! - He groaned, feeling as though the frost were striking down his back already. Then, hooking his coat up again and wrapping it about him, he sat back in the corner of the sledge, and prepared to wait with what patience he might.

Suddenly, above the monotonous wail of the wind he heard a new sound - a sound made by some living creature. It grew steadily louder, attained its maximum, and began as steadily to die away again. There could be no doubt what it was. It was a wolf. Nor was the beast so far off that the wind could drown the gradations of tone in its howl as it moved its jaws from side to side. Vassili put back his coat collar from his ear and listened strainedly. Brownie was doing the same, his ears sharply pricked, and when the howl ceased he changed his legs and snorted uneasily. After this Vassili found it more than ever impossible to sleep - found it impossible to steady his nerves for a moment. The more he tried to think of his business affairs and accounts, his reputation, dignity and wealth, the more did terror begin to master him;

while, above all other thoughts, and yet mixed up with them, floated the persistent question - Why did we not stop the night at Grishkino?

- God be with that landowner and his forest, - he thought to himself, - yet I wish I had never come across either of them. To have to spend the night here! They say that men who have been drinking always freeze readily, and I have been drinking to-night.

Listening thus to his own suggestions, he could feel himself beginning to tremble, though he hardly knew why - whether from cold, that is to say, or from fear. He tried to cover himself up and lie down as before, but found this impossible. He could not remain still, even for a second, but felt as if he must be up and doing something to stifle the terror which was rising in him, and against which he felt himself powerless. He got out his matches and cigarettes once more, but of the former there remained but three, and they of the sorriest kind. Indeed, all of them fizzled out without lighting when struck.

- The devil take you, you cursed bit of rubbish! Go and be hanged to you! - He burst out (though hardly knowing what it was he was swearing at) as he hurled the battered cigarette away. The matchbox was about to follow it, when he stayed his hand, and thrust the box into his pocket. Such a fit of restlessness now seized upon him that he could stay no longer where he was. Leaping from the sledge, and standing with his back to the wind, he began lowering and tightening up his belt again.

- Why should we lie here, waiting for death to come? - Vassili exclaimed as a new idea suddenly struck him. - Why not mount the horse and ride away? With only a man on his back he would never stick fast. - Then he thought of Nikita - Oh, but it would be nothing to him to die, - he went on. - What can his life matter to him? He has nothing much to lose with it, whereas I have much to gain with mine.

So he untied the horse, threw the halter over its neck, and tried to mount, but his fur coat and boots weighed him down, and he slipped back every time. Then he climbed onto the sledge and tried to mount from there, but the sledge kept rocking under his weight, and he failed again. At length, and for the

third time, he drew the horse close to the sledge, balanced himself cautiously on the rim, and succeeded so far as to find himself stretched face downwards athwart the animal's back. Lying thus, he wriggled himself forward once or twice until he had got his leg over and seated himself, his toes resting in the trace-loops of the saddle-piece. But the jolting of the sledge as it shook under Vassili's weight had awakened Nikita, who now raised himself and seemed to Vassili to be saying something.

- Look here, you fool, - shouted Vassili. - It's all through you that we have got into this plight - got into it for nothing, too, - and, tucking the flapping skirts of his greatcoat beneath his knees, he turned the horse round, and rode away from the sledge in the direction where he thought the forest and the forest keeper's lodge must be.

VII

Up to this moment Nikita had never once stirred since he first squatted down behind the sledge and covered himself over with the apron. Like all people who live in close contact with nature and are familiar with hardship, he was patient, and could sit waiting for hours, or even for days, without growing restless or losing his temper. He had heard his master call out to him twice, yet had returned no answer, for the sole reason that he did not feel inclined to stir or to go to the trouble of raising his voice. Although he was warm enough at the time he had sat down, both with the tea which he had drunk and with the exertion of plunging through snowdrifts, he knew that that would not last long, and that he would be powerless to restore the warmth by exercising himself, since he felt as utterly worn out as a horse feels when he stops and can go no further, despite the severest whipping, and his master sees that no further work can be got out of him until he has been rested and fed.

Moreover, one of his feet had got frost-bitten through its ragged boot, so that the big toe had lost all sensation and his whole body was becoming steadily colder and colder. Consequently, in time, the thought began to enter his head that he might have to die that night. Yet the thought was neither particularly unwelcome nor particularly awe-inspiring. It was not particularly unwelcome, for the reason that his life had not been exactly an uninterrupted holiday, but, on the contrary, a life of ceaseless servitude, of which he was beginning to grow weary. Nor did the thought seem to him particularly awe-inspiring, for the reason that, over and above the masters whom he had served on earth - masters such as Vassili Andreitch - he had always felt himself dependent upon the Great Master who had sent him into this life, and knew that, in dying, he would still remain that Master's servant, and that that Master would be good to him.

- Should I be sorry to leave the life in which I am settled and which I am accustomed to? - He thought. - Well, even if I have to go, I cannot help myself, and it were best to prepare for the new one.

- My sins? - He went on presently as he remembered his drunken orgies, the money squandered on drink, his insults to his wife, his frequent oaths, his

neglect of church-going, his non-observance of fast days, and all the many things for which the priest had reproved him at confession time. - Well, of course they were sins - I have never denied that; but it was God who made me what I am. Yet, what terrible sins they have been! What will become of me for such sins?

Then, from thinking of what might be in store for him that night he passed, without recurring to that thought, to memories which came into his head at random. He thought of Martha's arrival, of the workmen's carouse, of his refusal to share their liquor, of the present expedition, of Tarass's hut, of the talk about family separations, of his little lad, of Brownie (now, doubtless, growing warm under his sacking), and of the master who was making the sledge creak above him as he tossed and turned.

- Well, I had plenty of tea to drink there and was tired, - he thought, - I had no wish to start out again. I had no wish to leave such good living to come and die in this hole. Yet he wished otherwise.

Then all these memories swam together and jumbled themselves up in his head, and he went off into a doze.

From this doze he was awakened by Vassili shaking the sledge as he mounted the horse - shaking it so violently that it slewed right round and struck Nikita in the back with one of its runners, forcing him, willy-nilly, to shift his position. Stretching out his legs with some difficulty and sweeping the snow off them, he raised himself a little, and at once felt a pang shoot through his body. Understanding at the first glance what Vassili intended to do, he begged him to leave the sacking behind, since the horse no longer needed it and it would make an additional covering for himself. He shouted to Vassili to that effect, but the latter disappeared in the snow-dust without heeding him. Left alone, Nikita considered what he had better do. He felt that he had not sufficient strength also to go off in search of a human habitation, while it was impossible for him to resume his old seat, since the snow had filled up the hole already. Even if he got into the sledge, things would not mend, for he had no extra covering, and his coat and fur jacket no longer kept him warm. He could not have felt colder if he had been clad only in a shirt.

The situation was becoming one of positive agony.

- Father - our Heavenly Father! - He cried aloud; and the knowledge that he was not alone, but that there was One who could hear him and would never abandon him, brought him comfort. He drew a deep sigh and, with the apron still covering his head, crept into the sledge and lay down where his master had been. Even there, however, he could not grow warm. At first he kept shivering all over. Then the shivering fit passed away, and he began to lose consciousness. He might have been dead or asleep, for all he could tell, yet felt prepared for either eventuality.

VIII

Meanwhile Vassili was using his heels and the spare end of the halter to urge the horse in the direction where, for some reason or another, he supposed the forest and the forest-keeper to be. The snow blinded his eyes and the wind seemed as if it were struggling to stop him, but, bending forward at times to double the skirts of his coat and tuck them between his knees and the icy saddle-piece which made his seat such an uncomfortable one, he pressed the horse onwards unceasingly. The animal moved with difficulty, yet proceeded whither it was directed in its usual docile manner.

For what seemed to him some five minutes Vassili rode straight ahead, seeing nothing in front of him but the horse's head and ears and a sea of whiteness, and hearing nothing but the whistling of the wind over the horse's ears and round the collar of his fur coat. Suddenly, however, something black showed up before him. His heart began to beat hopefully, and he rode towards the object, imagining that he already discerned in its outlines the walls of the houses forming a village. The object did not keep still, however, but was forever waving from side to side. In fact, it turned out to be, not a village, but a tall piece of wormwood, which, growing out of a boundary ridge and projecting above the snow, bent violently over to one side each time that the wind struck it and went whistling through its stems. Somehow the sight of this wormwood thus tortured by the cruel wind caused Vassili to shudder, and he re-started the horse in haste, without noticing that, in turning aside to the wormwood, he had deviated from his former direction, and was now riding at a tangent to it. None the less, he imagined himself still to be bearing in the fancied direction of the forest-keeper's hut, and, although the horse kept trying to swerve to the right, he as often straightened it again to the left.

For the second time a dark object loomed up before him, filling his heart with joy, since he felt certain this time that here was a village at last: yet it proved to be only another boundary ridge topped with wormwood. As in the case of the first one, the sound of the wind wailing through the dried stems seemed to fill Vassili with fear. This piece of wormwood was exactly similar to the other piece in all respects save one - namely, that beside this second piece ran

the track of a horse's hoofs, slightly powdered over with snow. Vassili pulled up, leaned forward, and looked at the track carefully. It was the track of a small-sized hoof, and the covering of snow upon it was, as yet, a mere sprinkling. In short, it was the track of his own horse! He had described a complete circle, and that not a large one.

- So this is how I am to perish! - He thought. Then, lest he should yield to his terror, he started forward again, and urged on the horse even more strenuously than before. At every moment, as he strained his eyes into the swirl of whiteness before him, he seemed to see dark points stand out for a second and then vanish as soon as he looked at them. Once he thought he heard what might have been either the barking of a dog or the howl of a wolf, but the sound was so faint and uncertain that he could not be sure whether he had really heard anything or whether it had been only his fancy. He stopped and listened attentively.

Suddenly a weird, startling cry sounded in his very ears, and everything beneath him seemed to heave and tremble. He clutched the horse's mane, yet found that that too was quivering, while the cry grew ever more and more piercing. For some seconds Vassili could not frame a thought or understand in the least what was happening. Yet all that had happened was that the horse had been seized with the idea either of inspiring himself or of calling for help, and had neighed loudly in his raucous, guttural tones.

- How the beast frightened me, be hanged to it! - gasped Vassili to himself. Yet, although he understood now the cause of his terror, he could not shake himself free from it.

- I must consider things a moment and steady myself, - he thought. Yet it was all to no purpose, for he could not master himself - could not keep from urging the horse on; taking no heed the while that he was now riding before the wind instead of against it. His body was chilled and aching all over, but especially in the lower part, next the saddle-piece, where his coat was unhooked, whilst his hands and feet were shaking violently and his breath came in gasps. He felt sure now that he was to perish in the midst of this fearful waste of snow, and that nothing could save him.

Suddenly the horse gave a groan as it stuck fast in a snowdrift, and, struggling violently, began to sink sideways onto its flank. Vassili leapt off, displacing as he did so the trace-loops in which his feet had been resting, and so also the saddle-piece on which he had been seated. Yet he had no sooner dismounted than the horse righted himself, lurched forward, took a couple of plunges, and disappeared with a loud neigh, trailing behind him the sacking and harness, and leaving Vassili stranded in the snowdrift. Vassili made a rush to catch him, but the snow was so deep, and his fur coat so heavy, that he sank knee-deep at every step, and had taken no more than twenty strides when his breath failed him, and he had to stop.

- The timber, the rams for the butcher, the rent hold land, the store, the taverns, the iron-roofed villa and warehouse, my little heir - am I to leave them all? - He thought. - Is it to end like this? No, no, it cannot be!

For some reason or another there came into his mind at that moment a picture of the wormwood waving in the wind, and of himself twice riding up to it. Such terror seized upon him that he could hardly believe in the reality of what was happening. - I must be dreaming it all, - he thought, and tried, as it were, to awake from his dream: yet there was no awakening for him. It was real snow that was lashing his face, heaping his form over, and chilling his right hand, which had lost its mitten. It was a real desert, too, in which he was now left lonely - as lonely as the wormwood - and in which he must await an imminent, a swift, and an unthinkable death.

- O Queen of Heaven! O Holy Father Saint Nicholas who teaches us abstinence! - he began, with a dim recollection of the thanksgiving service of yesterday, of the icon with its blackened face and golden vestment, and of the candles for that icon which he had sold, and which, returned to him straightway, he had replaced in his locker after lighting them for a brief moment. Again and again he besought the wonder-working Saint Nicholas to save him from his fate, promising in return a thanksgiving and many candles. Yet all the time he knew beyond the possibility of doubt that, although that blackened face and golden vestment, as well as the candles, the priest, and the thanksgivings, were all of them very important and necessary there in the church, they could do nothing for him here, and that between those candles

and thanksgivings on the one hand, and his present forlorn plight on the other, there could be no real connection whatever.

- Still, I must not despair, - he thought. - I have only to follow the horse's track before it gets snowed over, and it will bring me out somewhere. Only, I must not hurry too much, or I might plunge into another snowdrift and be worse off than ever.

Nevertheless, for all his determination to go quietly, he could not help quickening his pace, breaking into a run, tumbling down continually, picking himself up again, and once more falling. Moreover, the horse's track was almost invisible where the snow was not deep.

- I am lost! - He said at last. - Not only won't be able to catch up with the horse, but I'm going to lose the horse's track as well.

Just as he said this, however, he happened to glance ahead, and caught sight of something dark there. It was Brownie! And not Brownie alone, but also the shafts and the handkerchief! The horse was standing beside the sledge, with the harness and sacking still dangling down his flank - but standing in a different position to before, since he was just under the shafts, and had his head (which he kept shaking at intervals) drawn close to the ground by the halter, which had caught round his pastern. It seemed that Vassili had stuck fast in the same ravine as that into which Nikita and he had previously blundered - that, as a matter of fact, the horse had been carrying him straight back to the sledge, and that, at the moment when he jumped off, he had only been fifty paces from it!

IX

Staggering up to the sledge, Vassili grasped hold of it and stood for a long time without moving as he endeavoured to steady himself and regain his breath. There was nothing to be seen of Nikita in his old position, but in the sledge there lay something heaped with snow, which Vassili guessed to be his servant. Vassili's terrors had now vanished - or, if any were left, it was merely lest he should have a return of the horrible panic which he had experienced on the horse's back, and, still more, when he found himself left in the snowdrift. At all costs he must not give way to that panic again; and if he would avoid that, he must be up and doing something - must be occupying his thoughts with something. First of all he planted himself with his back to the wind, and unfastened his fur coat to cool himself. Then, when he had regained his breath a little, he shook the snow off his boots and left-hand mitten (the other one was hopelessly lost, and probably lying somewhere a couple of inches below the snow), and refastened his belt tightly - much as he was accustomed to do when he was about to step out of his store to buy cartloads of grain which the men had brought. This done, he set about exerting himself. The first thing which it occurred to him to do was to disentangle the horse's leg, and, the halter thus freed, he tied Brownie up to the rim of the splashboard where he had been tied before. Next, he had just gone behind the horse to straighten the crupper, sacking and saddle-piece on his back, when he saw something stir in the sledge, and then the head of Nikita emerge from beneath the snow which covered it. The frozen man raised himself a little - though evidently with a great effort - and made a strange gesture with his hand in front of his face, as though he were brushing away a fly. As he did this he seemed to Vassili to be saying something - probably Vassili's name - so the latter left the sacking unstraightened and stepped up to the sledge.

- How is it with you now? - He asked, - and what are you trying to say?

- Only that I - I am dying, - answered Nikita with difficulty and in gasps. - Give my wages to the little lad or to the wife - it does not matter which.

- Are you frozen, then? - said Vassili.

- Yes - and dying; I know it quite well, - replied Nikita in a choking voice, and still fluttering his hand before his face as though to brush away a fly. - Forgive me, for Christ's sake.

For about half a minute Vassili stood without moving and in silence. Then all at once, and with the same air of decision as marked him when he had struck hands over a good bargain, he took a step backwards, tucked up the sleeves of his coat, and began with both hands to rake the snow off Nikita and out of the sledge. This done, he unhooked his belt, opened his fur coat, pushed Nikita hastily into a straight posture, and lay down upon him in such a way that the latter should be covered, not only with the coat, but with Vassili's own warm, overheated body. With one skirt of the coat tucked between Nikita's form and the side of the sledge, and the tail of it grasped between his ankles, Vassili remained lying prone, with his head resting upon the splashboard and his ears deaf either to the movements of the horse or to the howling of the wind, but intent only on listening to Nikita's breathing. For a long time Nikita lay without moving. Then he gave a deep sigh, and stirred faintly.

- There you are, you see, and yet you talk of dying! Just you lie still and grow warm, and we... - began Vassili.

To his great surprise Vassili found that he could say no more, for tears were welling from his eyes and his lower jaw was working. He broke off short, and swallowed a lump in his throat.

- How absurdly weak and nervous I have made myself, - he thought. Yet not only did he find this weakness far from unpleasant, but it actually gave him a sensation of joy such as he had never yet experienced.

- Yes, we shall manage it all right like this, - he said to himself, conscious of a rapturous feeling of emotion. After this he lay for a long time in silence, merely wiping his eyes against the fur of the coat, and tucking back its right-hand skirt as the wind blew it up at intervals; but at length he felt as though he must communicate his joy to a fellow-creature.

- Nikita, - he said.

- That is better. I am getting warm now, - came from underneath him.

- Here you go, brother, and I almost lost. And you would have been frozen, and I would...

Once more Vassili's cheeks started quivering and his eyes filled with tears, so that he could say no more.

- That's OK, - he said to himself. - Yet I know what I know about myself.

And he remained silent. Still he lay there. Warmth seemed to be passing into his body from Nikita below and from the fur coat above. Only the hands with which he held the skirts of the coat against Nikita's sides, and his feet, from between which the wind kept blowing the skirts away, were beginning to feel frozen. His mittenless right hand in particular felt numbed. Yet he never thought of his hands or feet - only of how he could best warm the peasant who was lying beneath him.

More than once he glanced at the horse and saw that its back was uncovered, since the sacking had now slipped off altogether and was lying on the snow. He felt as if he ought to go and cover the animal over again yet could not make up his mind to leave Nikita, even for a moment, and thus break the spell of that rapturous joy which now possessed him. As for his terrors, they had long since fled away.

- God will give - he won't pass! - He said to himself with reference to his efforts to warm Nikita - speaking, indeed, in just the same boastful tone in which he had been accustomed to speak of his sales or purchases.

He lay for an hour - for two - for three, but took no heed of the passing of time. At first there danced before his vision dim pictures of the storm, of the shafts, and of the horse under its high donga. Then these pictures became exchanged for jumbled memories of the festival, of his wife, of the stanovoi, and of the candle-locker - but beneath the picture of the candle-locker lay

Nikita. Then again he saw the peasants trading with him, and the white, iron roofed walls of his house - but beneath the picture of those walls again lay Nikita. Then everything became confused. One thing ran into another, until at last these various scattered impressions came together as the colours of a rainbow merge into a beam of white light, and he fell asleep. For long he slept without dreaming, but, just before the dawn came, there came also some sleep-visions. He seemed to be standing by the candle-locker, while old mother Tikhonova was asking him for a five-kopeck candle for the festival. He tried to take the candle out and give it to her, but his hands remained glued in his pockets. Then he tried to walk round the locker, but his legs refused to move, and his new, clean shoes stuck fast to the stone floor, so that he could not even raise his feet to take the shoes off.

Then suddenly the locker was not a locker at all, but a bed, and on that bed Vassili could see himself lying, face downwards - lying on his own bed at home. He was lying on the bed, and could not rise, although it was necessary for him to do so, seeing that Ivan Matveitch, the stanovoi, was coming to see him presently, and he must go with Ivan either to buy some timber or to put the crupper straight on the horse's back - he could not be sure which. He kept asking his wife, "Has he not come yet, Mikolovna?" - And she kept answering him, "No, not yet." Then he could hear someone driving up to the steps outside. Surely it must be he? But no - the vehicle had driven past. - "Is he not come yet, Mikolovna?" - He asked his wife once more, and once more she replied, "No, not yet." Thus he lay and lay upon the bed, unable to rise, and ever waiting - waiting: and the waiting was at once painful and joyous. Suddenly the joy of it was filled to the full! He for whose coming he had been waiting, was now at hand and it was not Ivan Matveitch nor anyone else. Yet still it was the Man for whom he had been waiting. He entered - did that Man - and called him: and this Man who had called him cried out to him again and bade him go and lie down upon Nikita. And Vassili was glad that this Someone had come. - Yes, I will go! - He cried in his joy, and with that cry Vassili awoke.

Yes, he awoke - but awoke a very different man to what he had been when he fell asleep. He tried to rise, and could not. He tried to move his hand, and could not. He tried to move his leg, and could not. Then he tried to turn his

head, but that also he could not do. This surprised him, yet in no way troubled him. Then he remembered that Nikita was lying beneath him, and that Nikita was growing warm and was coming back to life. It seemed to him that he was Nikita, and Nikita he, and that his life was no longer within himself, but within Nikita. He strained his ears till he caught the sound of breathing - yes, the faint, deep breathing of Nikita. "Nikita is alive!" - He cried to himself in triumph, "and therefore so also am I!"

Then he began to think about his money, his store, his house, his sales and purchases, and Mironoff's millions. He could not understand how that man whom men called Vassili Brekhunoff could bear to interest himself in such things as he did. "That man can never have known what is the greatest thing of all," - he thought of this Vassili Brekhunoff. - "He can never have known what I know. Yes, I know it for certain now. At last - I KNOW!"

Once again he heard the Man calling him who had called to him before, and his whole being seemed to respond in joy and loving-kindness as he replied: "I am coming, I am coming!" - For he joyfully felt that he was free at last, and that nothing could hold him further.

And, indeed, nothing further than that did Vassili Andreitch see or hear or feel in this world.

Around him the tempest still kept on. The same swirls of snow kept circling in eddies and covering the coats of the dead Vassili Andreitch and the trembling Brownie, the sledge (now almost invisible) and, stretched out upon its floor, the now reviving Nikita as he lay prone beneath the body of his dead master.

X

Just before morning Nikita awoke. It was the frost making its way down his back which aroused him. He had just been dreaming that he was driving from the mill with a load of his master's flour, and that, instead of taking the bridge over the stream, he went by the ford, and stuck fast. He could see himself getting under the load and trying to lift it as he straightened his back. Yet, strange to say, the load would not move, but clung always to his back, so that he could neither move the cart nor withdraw himself from beneath it. It seemed to be breaking his very loins. And how cold it felt! At all costs he must get away from beneath it. - Hold on, - he found himself saying to the someone who was causing the load to break his back. - Take off some of the sacks. Yet the load kept growing colder and colder, and pressing more and more heavily upon him. Then suddenly something gave a loud bang, and he became fully awake and remembered all that had happened. That chilly load - it was his dead frozen master. That loud bang - it had been caused by Brownie striking his hoofs against the sledge.

- Andreitch, Andreitch! - He cried cautiously to his master (though he half guessed the truth already) as he raised his back stiffly. But Andreitch returned no answer, while his body and legs were cold and stiff and heavy as weights.

- There is no doubt that he is dead, - thought Nikita. He turned his head round, pushed the snow away from in front of his face, and opened his eyes. It was quite light now. The wind was still humming through the shafts and the snow streaming down - but with this difference, that the snow was no longer dashing itself against the sides of the sledge, but piling itself up in silence over sledge and horse from the latter of which not even the sound of breathing was now to be heard.

- Brownie too must be frozen, - thought Nikita. And, indeed, those two loud hoof-strokes upon the sledge which had awakened him had been the last efforts of the now dead and frozen animal to keep upon his legs.

- Dear God, our Father, surely thou wilt call me also? - said Nikita. - If so,

Thy will be done. It would be hard that two of us should be taken and the other left. Let death come when it will, - and he drew his hand in again, closed his eyes and fell asleep, firmly convinced that this time he was really and truly dead.

It was about the time of the midday meal next day when some men dug out Vassili and Nikita - seventy yards only from the road, and half a verst from the village.

The snow had drifted completely over the sledge, but the shafts, with the handkerchief on them, were still visible. Brownie, belly-deep in the snow, stood a white frozen mass, his dead muzzle pressed tightly inwards against his rigid neck, his nostrils fringed with icicles, and his eyes coated over and glazed with ice as with frozen tears. Moreover, he had so wasted away in that one night that there remained of him but skin and bones. As for Vassili, he too was as stiff as a frozen carcase, and when his legs were pulled aside the corpse rolled off Nikita in a solid lump. His prominent, hawk-like eyes were frozen hard, and his mouth (open a little under his cropped moustache) filled with snow. Nikita only was alive, though frostbitten all over. Yet, when brought to himself, he could not be persuaded that he was not dead, and that all that was now happening to him was not taking place in the next world instead of in this. Indeed, his first feeling when he heard the men shouting above him as they dug out the sledge and then rolled the stiffened Vassili off him was one of surprise that men shouted in the next world even as they had shouted in this, and had similar bodies! When at length he understood that he was really here - here in this present world - he felt vexed rather than pleased, especially as he could feel that the fingers of both his hands were frostbitten.

For about two months he lay in hospital. Three of his fingers had to be amputated, but the others healed, so that he was able to go to work again and to live twenty 3-ears longer - first as a labourer, and then, in his old age, as a watchman. Indeed, he died only this year - at home and under the icons, with a lighted wax candle in his hands, just as he had always wished. Before his death he took leave of his old wife, and pardoned her for the cooper. He took leave also of his son and grandchildren, and died thoroughly happy to think that his death left his son and daughter-in-law freed from the burden of

having a supernumerary mouth to feed, and that this time he himself would really pass from a life which had grown wearisome to him to that other life which had been growing more and more familiar and alluring to him each year and hour. Is he better or worse off now where he has awakened after his death - the death which really came that time? Is he disillusioned, or has he really found what he expected? Soon we shall all know.

[1] The curved frame, fitted with bells, which surmounts the collar in Russian horse harness.

[2] The verst = about two-thirds of an English mile.

[3] The village headman.

[4] The local magistrate.

[5] The dessiatin = $2 \frac{4}{5}$ acres.

[6] The sazhen - 7 English feet.

[7] The local magistiate.